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Letter dated 21 April 1999 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith information from the State Committee of the Russian Federation on environmental protection "On possible environmental consequences of the military aggression by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Yugoslavia" (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 94, and of the Security Council.

In view of the urgency of this issue, I would request you to take steps to have this document circulated as expeditiously as possible.

(Signed) S. LAVROV

Annex

State Committee of the Russian Federation on environmental protection: "Information on possible environmental consequences of the military aggression by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Yugoslavia"

At present NATO is intensively bombing targets in Yugoslavia. While at the beginning of the aggression, military targets were involved, the targets of the bomb and missile strikes are now chemical plants, oil depots and oil refineries.

According to expert assessments, this is causing large-scale contamination of the environment by highly toxic substances, oil and oil products, and also the products of their combustion, which may lead to long-term adverse effects because of the degradation of the environment not only in the territory of Yugoslavia itself, but also in countries of the entire European region. As a result of the bombing of the oil refinery in Pančevo and of the "Petrokhemia" and "Azotara" chemical factories alone, large quantities of oil, oil products, products of their combustion, and also dangerous, harmful, explosive and highly inflammable substances, with long-term harmful effects - carcinogenic, mutagenic and teratogenic - have been released into the environment. The danger of perceptible global climate changes as a result of the significant discharges of soot and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere cannot be excluded.

It should be noted that because of the fires associated with the bombing of chemical facilities and oil refineries, there is a great danger of contamination of the environment by such products of combustion as dioxins, dioxin compounds and benzopyrene, which may be even more toxic than the products of the chemical factories themselves.

Thus, the toxicity of dioxin greatly exceeds the toxicity of military poisons (sarin, soman, tabun), cyanides, strychnine and curare. However, a basic capability of these compounds is their ability to accumulate in the environment and in living organisms. Dioxins, even in small concentrations, cause a suppression of the immune system. In higher concentrations, they cause mutagenic, embryotoxic and teratogenic effects, and have an adverse effect on the gene pool of the population, and of the plant and animal kingdoms. Contamination by dioxins was the reason for the massive damage in Viet Nam as a result of the use of dioxin-containing herbicides by the army of the United States of America and in Seveso (Italy) as a result of an accident at a chemical combine; contamination was also recorded in the state of Missouri (United States of America) and Japan (use of food products contaminated by dioxins).

Benzopyrene, which forms when oil products burn at low temperatures (for example, in fires at oil refineries and oil depots) is a very powerful carcinogen.

The deliberate bombing of environmentally hazardous targets and the growing scale of damage to the environment demonstrate that there is a transition from localized military action to the phase of large-scale environmental warfare. A paradox of the situation is that some of Yugoslavia's closest neighbours are

It should be noted that the provisions of a number of other international conventions and international declarations which restrict damage to the environment as a result of military action are also being violated:

World Charter for Nature, 1982, article 5: "Nature shall be secured against degradation caused by warfare or other hostile activities" and article 20: "Military activities damaging to nature shall be avoided";

Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment, 1972;

Convention for the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage (World Heritage Convention 1972), article 6, paragraph 3: "Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage ... situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention";

Protocol I additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts, article 35, paragraph 3: "It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment".